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#### IV.—THE PROBLEMATIC HERO IN GERMAN FICTION.

Among Goethe's *Sprüche in Prosa* we find the following maxim: "Es giebt Problematische Naturen, die keiner Lage gewachsen sind, in der sie sich befinden, und denen keine genug thut. Darum entsteht der ungeheure Widerstreit, der das Leben ohne Genuss verzehrt."

Written late in the Altmeister's career, appearing for the first time on the forty-ninth page of the forty-ninth volume of his posthumous works, the maxim expresses the practical wisdom of a sage, who calmly surveys his long life and experience. It does more. It is a formula, that denotes the composition of a certain type of character, discovered by a keen observer of human life. It goes still farther. It pronounces dispassionately the inevitable doom of the type in its struggle for existence. Finally, the maxim offers the solution of a psychological problem to which Goethe devoted a lifetime, and which he never tired of illustrating or amplifying.

The problem is this: What is the explanation of the tragic course of so many lives, on which Nature seems so bountifully to have bestowed her gifts? They were amply equipped for their battle of life, yet they failed utterly, their hearts becoming filled with a pessimistic scorn of all human existence. Were they opposed by an unpropitious fate, or did the stars of their fateful destiny reside in their own breasts? Goethe answers in terse but adequate phrase, 'they are problematic characters, who are never equal to the situation in which they are placed, and whom no situation satisfies. Therefore arises the terrible conflict that consumes their lives without happiness.'

The problematic person never realizes completely what is demanded of him in the situation into which life places him; there is something in his nature that prompts him to act

contrary to what is reasonable and logical. On every important issue of life he wavers; instead of acting at the decisive moment he hesitates. He is, mayhap, an idealist, and struggles against the tide of tradition and custom; yet he lacks the moral force and the will-power of the reformer, who stems the current or diverts it. No situation in life satisfies him, partly because he realizes his unfitness, and partly because he believes in his secret heart that a real opportunity has never been afforded him. He blames the world for withholding from him his due. The result is a conflict which consumes his life without happiness. The world becomes "flat, stale, and unprofitable."

Most of the pessimism expressed in literature arises from the personal experience of problematic characters. Byron, the pessimist of English literature, was born a nobleman without adequate means, he lacked the moral qualities, perhaps the ability to improve his condition. The martyrlike pose of *Wellschmerz* appears nowhere to better effect than in the works of Heine, who in his early career found himself baffled in every pursuit, though he tried banking and learning and love. Lenau crossed the seas to find the place for which he was fitted, and he went back again still bent on his hopeless quest.

Goethe was conscious of the problematic elements of his own character, and overcame them by the process of analysis. He constructed poetic images of them and gave them life. No type do we find more frequently in Goethe's works than that of the problematic character; there is a long gallery of them, Werther, Eduard, Wilhelm Meister, Tasso, and Faust. Why was Goethe enabled to understand so well the character of Shakespeare's Hamlet, to give, in the words of Francis Jeffrey, "The most able, eloquent, and profound exposition of the character of Hamlet,—that has ever been given to the world!" It was because he explained him essentially as a *Problematische Natur*, as a man of thought forced into a world of action, as a man not fitted to perform the duty

of blood-revenge to which he was called. Hence the terrible conflict that poisoned his mind.

Goethe's first complete study of the type is his Werther. Conscious of his own weakness, Werther exclaims: "Was! Da wo andere mit ihrem bischen Kraft und Talent vor mir in behaglicher Selbstgefälligkeit herumschwadronieren, verzweifle ich an meiner Kraft, an meinen Gaben? Guter Gott, der du mir alles schenkest, warum hieltest du nicht die Hälfte zurück und gabst mir Selbstvertrauen und Genügsamkeit!" Self-confidence and contentment are lacking to him, though he has talents in plenty. He is a giant in thought and feeling, yet a pigmy in action.

The temper of the age finds expression in this character. The sentimentalism of Richardson and Rousseau fell upon good soil in Germany, where the pietistic movement had for a century taught men to fly from the outer world, and take refuge in the inner world of the soul. The spiritual became the real life. The tendency toward mysticism and soul-life was strengthened by the new and deeper analysis of emotion, and the romantic worship of Nature. The sentimentalism that resulted derived aesthetic pleasure from contemplation of man's unhappy lot in the outer world. Weltschmerz arose from a conviction that unhappiness in the outer world is the fate of every being that thinks and feels. Yet this species of self-torture had its compensations. The sentimentalist was not disposed to change places with the self-satisfied philistine, or with the rationalist, who was deprived of the exquisite pain of the emotional rack, and must ever forego the alleviating pleasures of a flood of tears.

The world of emotion being a law unto itself, it was not governed by the standards of the world. Thus there was a separation of the world of emotion from the world of action. An action was not base when there was lofty sentiment to balance it. Rousseau's father allowed his son to become an outcast, so that he might himself enjoy the more unrestrictedly a petty inheritance which the boy was entitled to

from his mother. Yet the son excuses the action of a father, whose tenderness and devotion were so well known to him, and observes that we may become unjust and wicked in action, without having ceased to be just and good in soul.<sup>1</sup> The eloquence of Rousseau made it fashionable for women of rank to nurse their own children, yet he sent his own to the foundling hospital, blaming the existing social system for it. A similar contradiction, a divorce of sentiment from action is found in the character of Werther. He compares suicide to theft by a man who steals bread to save his family from starvation. Noble and grand in sentiment Werther is puerile in action, if not selfish and cowardly. He is not a complete man, for we associate with manhood the power to become victorious in a moral struggle. This is the criticism which the author himself has made of Werther, in a dedication to the second part, addressed to the reader: "Sieh, dir winkt sein Geist aus seiner Höhle. Sei ein Mann und folge mir nicht nach."

The frequency with which the problematic hero appears in Goethe's works of fiction cannot be explained completely by his theory of the novel. The better explanation is that Goethe described that which he saw about him. There was lacking for the leisure class of that time common interests, the opportunity for activity in civil and political careers, a training school for clear vision, sane judgment and manly action. Spirituality, fine sentiment and beautiful thinking were demanded of the minds that wished to rise above mediocrity. Such are Edward in the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Meister and Lothario in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*,—wavering heroes, who are overcome in the conflict between passion and duty, unless perhaps rescued by some secret fraternity, that mysteriously controls their devious paths.

But in his dramatic works also Goethe has exhibited the *Problematische Natur*. In *Tasso* the emotional nature, the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. R. Lowell, "Rousseau and the Sentimentalists." *Literary Essays*, II, p. 248 f.

pathetic aspects of the sensitive soul lacerated by the thorns and briars of the realistic world, are presented in that compact and vivid manner, in which the drama ever excels prose fiction. The author again points out the moral, when he regrets that Nature did not forge the two divergent characters Tasso and Antonio into one.

Next we find the central figure of the drama upon which Goethe was at work three score years an example of the type under discussion. The Faust of Part 1 fulfills all conditions of the problematic character, and indeed appears more consistent and possible psychologically when interpreted from this point of view. The scholar and idealist of unquestionable sincerity suddenly turned libertine is a transformation we cannot readily understand without having first become acquainted with other members of the family to which he belongs. Faust feeling the limitations of human knowledge loaths the position which he occupies, in which he accuses himself of having been insincere, of having led his scholars up and down by the nose. He aspires to equality with the creative spirits of Nature, but is hurled back upon his narrow sphere by the Earth-spirit's rebuke: "*Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst nicht mir.*" Reaching the verge of despair, he is saved from suicide by a miracle, as it were,—by the pure, uplifting strains of the Easter chorus. He becomes once more a man among men, enjoying with them the simple pleasures of an outing in the fields and open country. Under the soothing influence of the twilight and evening, his soul is at peace with God and man, but not long so to be, for the growling and snarling of the dog that has accompanied him, again stirs his skeptical mood. "*Aber ach! schon fühl' ich bei dem besten Willen, Befriedigung nicht mehr aus dem Busen quillen.*" The demon in the dog is discovered and forced to reveal himself in his true character. Mephistopheles outwits the magician, from whom is soon heard the full confession of his life's misery:

“Entbehren sollst du! sollst entbehren!  
 Das ist der ewige Gesang,  
 Der jedem an die Ohren klingt,  
 Den, unser ganzes Leben lang,  
 Uns heiser jede Stunde singt.”

Renunciation, resignation, these are the doctrines against which Faust's hungry soul riots and rebels. Yet they are the key-note of Goethe's ethical teaching. This revolt against a life of self-denial constitutes him a problematic character, he is not able, nor willing to yield to the stern task of renunciation, which life imposes. The *Sturm und Drang*, the titanic force within him will not stoop to such “slave-morality.” Pantheist that he is, he recognizes with bitter disappointment that the portion of the divinity that resides in him, is narrowly restricted in its sphere, and cannot presume to measure its activity with the creative forces of the universe.

“Der Gott, der mir im Busen wohnt,  
 Kann tief mein Innerstes erregen;  
 Der über allen meinen Kräften thront,  
 Er kann nach aussen nichts bewegen;  
 Und so ist mir das Dasein eine Last,  
 Der Tod erwünscht, das Leben mir verhasst.”

The taunt of Mephistopheles, that the philosopher had lately not been true to his deductions, provokes Faust to pronounce a curse upon the sweet recollections of childhood, upon the inspiration of reverence that drew him back to life. With that he names every object that man deems worthy to live for and crushes it with his diabolical skepticism.

“So fluch' ich allem was die Seele  
 Mit Lock- und Gaukelwerk umspannt,  
 Und sie in diese Trauerhöhle  
 Mit Blend- und Schmeichelkräften bannt!  
 Verflucht was uns in Träumen heuchelt,  
 Des Ruhms, der Namensdauer Trug!  
 Verflucht was als Besitz uns schmeichelt,

Als Weib und Kind, als Knecht und Pflug!  
 Verflucht sei Mammon, wenn mit Schätzen  
 Er uns zu kühnen Thaten regt, . . .  
 Fluch sei dem Balsamsaft der Trauben!  
 Fluch jener höchsten Liebeshuld!  
 Fluch sei der Hoffnung! Fluch dem Glauben!  
 Und Fluch vor allen der Geduld!"

Having demolished with this terrible curse all that can sustain man, the consistent action of Faust would have been to destroy his own life and allow nothing to deter him from this purpose; but like a drowning man catching at a straw, he snatches the wager offered by Mephistopheles, consecrating himself to the mad reel which the devil promises to put in motion. Faust wills to satisfy his thirst for experience, and after draining the cup of life to the dregs to suffer the shipwreck to which man is doomed and die.

"Du hörest ja, von Freud' ist nicht die Rede  
 Dem Taumel weih' ich mich, dem schmerzlichen Genuss, . . .  
 Und was der ganzen Menschheit zugeteilt ist,  
 Will ich in meinem innern Selbst geniessen, . . .  
 Und so mein eigen Selbst zu ihrem Selbst erweitern,  
 Und wie sie selbst, am End' auch ich zerscheitern."

The effect upon him is the development of the problematic character, lofty in aspiration, grand in sentiment, but immoral in action. Life's pleasures do not satisfy, they cheat and tantalize him.

"So tauml' ich von Begierde zu Genuss,  
 Und im Genuss verschmacht' ich nach Begierde."

Yet in the second part of the drama, before the shipwreck of death comes, the hero finds the moment that satisfies, and bids it tarry, he discovers the situation in life which is fitting for him, in which he feels peace and comfort, and thereby ceases to be a problematic character. As has been pointed out in Francke's *Social Forces in German Literature*, the individualist has become the collectivist, the individual is



engaged in a life of self-sacrifice in the interests of humanity and therein finds happiness on earth.

The literary importance of Goethe became fully appreciated for the first time through the writings of the Romantic school. It was characteristic of them to go beyond appreciation and worship in Goethe the master whose every effort was worthy of imitation. Prose fiction being the direction in which the creative power of the Romantics sought expression, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* became the model which was copied in every detail;—in its theory of the passive hero, opposed to the active hero of the drama, in its portrayal of events and sentiments in contrast to character and deeds in the drama, and even in its unimportant features, such as the interspersing of lyrics in the body of the text. The *Problematische Naturen* naturally became the center of their *Erziehungsromane*, and we need but name the *William Lovel* of Tieck, *Lucinde* of Friedrich Schlegel, *Florentin* of Dorothea Schlegel, *Godwi* of Brentano, to illustrate the rule that imitations in literature are rarely successful. These creations are problematic indeed; their world of emotion is separated entirely from their world of action, refusing to be bound by moral law.

Similar to these are the so-called "Titans" of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter,—idealists, to use the figurative language of the author, who would make a cross-bow of the limitless milky way, or of fancy's rain-bow, but lack the bow-string to span the distance. Full of fine sentiment, thrilled with grand ideals, they are depraved in action. The novel *Siebenkäs* contains such a character in the Armen-advocate *Siebenkäs*, who, married to a faithful, plodding wife, falls in love with a woman whom he recognizes at once as his intellectual equal, a *Titanide*. To become separated from his honest wife he resorts to the scheme of pretending to be dead, sending an empty coffin to be buried, meanwhile marrying his new lady at a distant place. The fact that the forsaken wife is soon

consoled by the attentions of the school-inspector, does not render the action of *Siebenkäs* the less contemptible.

In the novel *Titan*, Roquairol and Linda are typical. In describing the character of Roquairol, Jean Paul approaches plastic delineation as closely as he has ever done. He speaks of him to this effect: "Roquairol is a child and a victim of the century. When yet boys, such as he have been prematurely gorged with pleasures and advanced ideas, for which their natures were not yet fairly ripe. In consequence their lives are soon burned out; there exists for them no longer a new pleasure or a new truth, and the old ones have not been retained in their completeness or their freshness; their future lies an arid waste before them, harboring the ghosts of pride, disgust, skepticism, and contradiction; only the wing of fancy still quivers on their corpses." Their lives, in a word, are summed up in the lines of Faust: "So tauml' ich von Begierde zu Genuss, und im Genuss verschmacht' ich nach Begierde."

The period of reaction in Germany, beginning with the establishment of the Holy Alliance in 1815, and ending with the Revolution of 1848, not only destroyed all hope of liberal government and national unity, but more than ever deprived the upper classes of a proper outlet for their activities in public life. Even private enterprise on a large scale in manufacturing or in commerce was checked by conservatism. The rigid press censorship prohibited the discussion of the problems of the day; writers as those classed in 1835 under the name "das junge Deutschland" finding their mouths closed on the subject of political emancipation, fell to advocating the emancipation of the flesh, and to breaking the bonds of moral restriction. A more fertile soil for the growth of problematic characters can hardly be imagined, with illustrations abundant in real life.

It is impossible within the narrow limits of this paper to trace the history of the problematic character, following him through the course of German fiction. All that can be done

is to select a few of the more prominent types for closer inspection.

The best delineator of the type among modern writers of prose fiction is Friedrich Spielhagen, who betrayed in his early career the influence of Gutzkow, himself a creator of problematic heroes. *Problematische Naturen* was the title of Spielhagen's first two-volume novel, published in 1860, which pictured the age immediately preceding 1848. Professor Berger and his pupil Oswald Stein are the avowed problematic characters, but they are of a nobler type than the titans of Jean Paul or the weaklings of the Romantic period. These men also suffer from the malady *Weltschmerz*, yet their pessimism is of a different kind from what we have had before; it is the pessimism reduced to a system,—that of the founder of German pessimism, Arthur Schopenhauer. The *Weltschmerz* of Byron was expressed in the lines:

“Count o’er the joys thine hours have seen,  
Count o’er thy days from anguish free,  
And know, whatever thou hast been,  
’Tis something better not to be.”

This is a species of *Weltschmerz* arising from an arithmetical calculation, which sums up all the ills that man endures, and finds that the total outweighs man's total of happiness. Most great minds have made the same computation with similar results, and one who was singularly gifted with the means of securing happiness, who was born when Jupiter and Venus were in conjunction, declared that he could count his perfectly happy days on his fingers. The pessimism which we find now is a system of philosophy which recognizes in the world but will and idea, subjects the human world of action to a blind, ungoverned will, manifesting itself in the will to live. Human free will being denied, pain being the only positive experience, pleasure being the absence of pain, the highest ideal of man becomes the denial of the will to live, a refuge in the ascetic life, which is free

at once of the suffering as well as of the evanescent pleasures of human existence.

This flight from the world is pictured in the life of Spielhagen's Professor Berger, to whose intellectual greatness the author does full justice, yet whose search after the realm of Nirvana he in a manner travesties. Berger, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Grünwald, one morning ascends the lecturer's platform, and after discoursing in his usual brilliant manner, suddenly, to the surprise and consternation of his hearers, breaks off in the following manner: "Do you know, gentlemen, what the youth of Sais saw, when he lifted the veil, which covered the secret, the great secret, that was to be the key to all the confused mysteries of life? See gentlemen, I now take my head apart, one-half in this hand, one-half in the other hand,—what do you see in the head of the famous Professor Berger, at whose feet you sit, listening to his words and copying them into your stupid note-books with screeching pens,—what do you see? Just the same that the youth of Sais saw, when he lifted the veil of truth. Nothing, absolutely nothing. *Nichts für sich, nichts an sich, an und für sich: nichts!* And the fact that this hollow, barren nothing is the essence of it all (*des Pudels Kern*) drove the youth to madness, and will also upset your reason, if you have any to overturn." The professor thereupon requested his students to close their note-books and join him in singing: 'Da sitzt eine Flieg' an der Wand,' during which he set to catching imaginary flies in the lecture-room, every now and then opening his hand and exclaiming triumphantly, "Do you see,—nothing, and again nothing?" On the advice of his physicians, the professor goes to a sanatorium (he is willing to go) there to pursue his researches into the *Urnichts*. He is visited by his favorite pupil Oswald Stern, who pleads with the professor to allow him to remain in his company. 'I despise the world as well as you,' he exclaims. 'I know it well,' replies the master, 'but to despise the world is only the first stage of three toward the

great secret.' 'And what is the second stage? Name it so that I may traverse it at a bound.' 'Scorn yourself.' 'And the third?' 'Scorn being scorned' (*Verachten dass man verachtet wird*). 'And the great secret, what is it?' 'He who has gone through the three stages, knows it and understands it without asking. Who asks for it, knows it not, and would not understand it.'

Oswald has had cause to despise the world for its social distinctions. Later he cannot help despising himself for the vacillating manner in which he bestows his affections, and for the elopement with a married woman which results therefrom. Meeting the scorn of the world, he in turn scorns being scorned, reaching thus the last stage toward the great secret, that is, I take it, the denial of existence. The author gives the career of master and pupil a worthy close. They die defending the cause of freedom behind the barricades in the streets of Berlin, in the March revolution of 1848. Their fall is symbolical, coming before the dawning of the new era. Such as the Baron Oldenburg, strong men who have overcome that which was problematic in their own characters, survive and enter a new and fitting field of action.

The criticism has been made of Spielhagen, that he has always remained a painter of *Problematische Naturen*.<sup>1</sup> This is only half true, for he relieves these dark figures with portraits of men and women that succeed and are a source of hope and comfort. Moreover it must be admitted that Spielhagen has shown a master-hand in his delineations of the problematic hero; and no one since Goethe has succeeded with them as well as he. Frequently they are men, such as Leo in the novel *In Reih und Glied* (*Rank and File*), who are full of new ideas, and attempt to become true to their principles; in this case social reform and the life of the socialist Ferdinand Lasalle have supplied the basis of study. Through lack of sustaining moral force, however, the hero

<sup>1</sup> Bartels, *Die Alten und die Jungen*, p. 131.

loses sight of his aim and dies wretchedly. Spielhagen has pictured the feminine type in Angela, the heroine being pictured as the mirror of all that is adorable and attractive; yet in great measure in consequence of her skepticism, and pessimistic cast of mind, she falls in a moral struggle.

A word should be said about the presence of the problematic character in the most recent literature of Germany, that modern *Sturm und Drang* period, the epoch of German Naturalism, following in the wake of Zola, Tolstoi, and Ibsen. If we examine for a moment the works of the ablest exponent of the new literature, the dramas of Gerhart Hauptmann, we notice that they teem with problematic characters. Loth, the would-be social reformer, in *Vor Sonnenaufgang*, and the whole family Scholtz, in *Das Friedensfest*, are misfits, incompleted beings, scarcely human, doomed to unhappiness. What a wasted effort on the part of Frau Buchner and her daughter to rescue Wilhelm Scholtz; with all their kindness they will not be able to save him from ultimate confinement in a mad-house. In the drama *Einsame Menschen*, Johannes Vockerat, the central figure, by the reading of a few scientific books, and the hearing of a few university lectures has become a new man, fancying the coming of an era of changed relations between man and woman, not governed by old moral standards. For his rash act of suicide he has thrown the blame on his worthy parents,—narrow-minded, their son thinks, yet they are good hearts and stable characters, and a mite of their religious faith would have saved the son in his desperate conflict between duty and the phantoms of his mind. In the dramas in which Hauptmann is less under the influence of Ibsen and has taken his independent course, we again find *Problematische Naturen*; for example, the decadent artist College Crampton, the historical figure Florian Geier, the leader of the peasant insurrection in the sixteenth century, who lacked not the opportunity but the ability to make the best use of it. Finally, in that beautifully imagined fairy-drama which has

taken the world by storm, *Die Versunkene Glocke*, Heinrich the bell-founder belongs to the class. His dissatisfaction with his life is typical, for he feels that his genius is not adequate, the well-spring is not within him, or if it is, he lacks confidence, like Werther; he appeals to the supernatural aid of the fairy world, and despairs unless thus assisted. He is callous to the love and self-sacrifice of his wife, leaves duty behind, calling it drudgery, and flies to an ideal that transcends his power.

To do justice to the frequency with which the problematic personages appear in German fiction cannot be attempted within the limits of this paper. Our view might be broadened by adding to our gallery Noras and Brands and Anna Karéninas from foreign literatures. Our view would be deepened by examining the life around us, observing the professional man who has missed his calling, the artist but half equipped for the great work before him, the wife whose outside interests cause her to scorn the duties of her home.

The definition of Goethe traces the outlines of the problematic character accurately. He is never equal to the situation into which life has put him. He may lack confidence in himself and waver on all important occasions when action means victory, he may be too fastidious in his tastes, or too lofty an idealist; at all events he is dissatisfied, thinking the world has not afforded opportunity. His growing pessimism is apt to scorn the world's moral laws, plunging the idealist into libertinism, or at least weakening his will to correct his deficiencies, or strive toward a realization of his ideals. In the struggle for the survival of the fittest, the problematic character invariably goes to ruin. The cosmic process tends toward the perfection of human character. Strong character we admire above talent, and acknowledge the justice of its victory.

There are problematic elements in the German character that account for the frequent appearance of the type in German literature. Thinkers may prove wavering in action,

idealism may lead *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* to a master-morality that tramples justice and humanity under foot, thoroughness may produce that intemperate greed of pleasure that prompted Faust to exclaim: "*Ich taumel' von Begierde zu Genuss, und im Genuss verschmacht ich nach Begierde.*"

If we look at the Germany of to-day, however, we need not light a lamp to search for manhood. The men who founded the Empire, and those who brought it securely through its many trials after the Franco-German war, were not problematic characters. There is manhood in the wonderful industrial growth of the country, in its ever-increasing trade. The nation has meanwhile kept its leading position in all provinces of scientific research, and has solved some of the great social questions in a practical way.

This Germany has not been adequately represented in its present literature. We should never allow ourselves to be deceived by prevailing fads and fashions in literature; they concern but a small set and do not give expression to the great, underlying forces that move the nation. We expect once more to see the mirror held up to nature,—a mirror neither concave nor convex, but truthful in its reflections. The problematic hero in such a literature would be cast down from his place, and the truly epic figures of complete manhood and strength of character, with the world of emotion in harmony with that of action, would succeed to his position of prominence.

A. B. FAUST.